

Today is “Prisoners’ Sunday” and it begins “Prisoners’ Week” in which we remember in a special way all those who are in prison. Everywhere. Being in prison is one of those things that make us most easily fall into judgementalism. Well, we tell ourselves, they must have done something bad, or they wouldn’t be in there. Often this is quite true: some people have done such bad things that they *should* be in prison because that’s where they belong and none of us would be safe if they weren’t. On the other hand, other people may be there through unfortunate circumstances beyond their control; others still actually belong in psychiatric care, but there isn’t enough room in hospital. There is certainly a minority of prisoners who are on remand, without bail, waiting for trial – after which they may be found not guilty. God knows what they will learn about the harshness of life behind bars. We should always try to be non-judgemental about other people – but especially about the men and women in prison, whose misfortune can very quickly push us onto the moral high ground. Sometimes – but not always, of course – it is a matter of degree: if telling a lie was a criminal offence, would any of us still be free?

When something goes wrong in our lives, it’s very hard to shake off the feeling that we’re being punished. From the serious matters such as suffering pain or losing a friend to more mundane things like stubbing our toe or misplacing a personal item – most often we say to ourselves: “Now what have I done?” The feeling that when things go wrong we are

being caught out and punished – or at the very least, ticked off by God – runs deep. But it is wrong.

It is also sometimes very hard for us to believe that God does not get angry – but he doesn't. When we look around and see some of the dreadful things that go on in the world, we think God *must* be angry, *has* to be angry, *ought* to be angry.... but he isn't... it's us who are angry. Julian of Norwich, in her *Revelations of Divine Love* says: "And when I looked, I saw that there was no anger in the divine nature; rather, the anger was all in ourselves."

The dictionary definition of 'punishment', which comes from the Latin verb *punire*, is 'to punish, correct, to take vengeance or inflict a penalty' – however, I suggest that it shouldn't be to take vengeance at all. As Gandhi said 'An eye for an eye ends up with the whole world blind.' Prison should have nothing to do with vengeance, but correction alone. To correct someone means giving them the opportunity to see that what they have done is wrong and to change their behaviour. Prison shouldn't simply be a deterrent; it must have a corrective purpose. That's why – for me at least – the idea of an eternal hell is so problematic; an eternal hell has no corrective purpose and becomes just sadism – which paints a horrifying picture of God. I believe it is the dark alleyways of the human mind that feel the need for divine anger, for an eternal hell, for punishment, for vengeance. Not God.

None of us can afford to be complacent. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Heidegger – whose writing is mostly incomprehensible – said that the human condition is *Gerworfenheit* – a word he himself made up – which he described as: “A state of ‘thrownness’ in the present, with all its attendant frustrations, sufferings, and demands that one does not choose, such as social conventions or ties of kinship and duty.” He said that we are ‘thrown into life’ like a dog without a bone. We share this – all of us – with people whose life have maybe gone wrong and who have ended up in prison. To put it simply: most of the time, for much of life, we don’t get a choice in what happens. Certainly, at the most basic level, we didn’t choose to be born... or where or how. We were just ‘thrown’ into life.

And in this unchosen thrownness, we may not be behind bars, but we can still be a prisoner in so many other ways. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: “I tell you truly, whoever sins, is a slave to sin.” (8:34) Or we can also say: ‘a prisoner of sin.’ Our hearts can be prisoners of fear or hatred or resentment, our minds can be enchained by anxiety or obsession, our bodies can be trapped by illness or injury. And the bars that most keep us imprisoned are those three words, ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’. The great Persian mystic Jalal Rumi, said a number of things about ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’, but I think these are probably the most beautiful:

“Why are still sitting in your prison cell? The door is wide open.”

“One of the marvels of the world: the sight of a soul sitting in prison with the key in its hand.”

And: “I long to escape from the prison of my ego and lose myself in you, O Lord.”